



Commissioner's Column

Technology Should be Paired with Logic and Reason

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When we think of the nature of inquiry, logic, reason and deduction, the fictional character of Sherlock Holmes springs immediately to mind.

Holmes, a fictional detective created by Scottish author and physician Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, became the quintessential “consulting detective,” celebrated for his astute logical reasoning and his use of pioneering forensic science skills to solve a multitude of criminal cases created by Doyle’s brilliant mind.

The character of Sherlock Holmes first appeared in publication in 1887 and was ultimately featured in four novels and 56 short stories by Doyle.

Doyle was considered a prominent, influential and intellectual member of London’s upper crust. Holmes and the solutions to the amazing cases that grabbed the public’s attention made the author famous.

In 1917 at the height of his fame, Doyle — the master of deductive reasoning and forensic science — publicly declared his belief in fairies. The English-speaking world was shocked. The man who created the ever-logical Sherlock Holmes actually believed in fairies? Even when the crude technology of the time examined his “evidence” and refuted his claims, Doyle stubbornly ignored the evidence and continued to proclaim his personal beliefs.

Doyle’s public humiliation started when two English schoolgirls, 16-year-old Elsie Wright and

her 10-year-old cousin Frances Griffiths, innocently launched a worldwide deception. While playing, the girls took what they claimed were close-up photographs of winged fairies dancing amid the foliage.

Looking at the photographs today, even without the aid of laboratory examination, it seems amazing the photos are two-dimensional cardboard cutouts. Photography, however, was a novel art then and many believed “the camera never lies.”

With Doyle proclaiming their authenticity, the photos soon appeared in magazines and the world was exposed to the notion that fairies existed, confirmed by the camera. Although experts from the two major film companies examined the photographs, neither would confirm the photos were authentic.

By 1983, the cousins, then in their late 70s and early 80s, admitted in an article published in the magazine “The Unexplained” that the photographs had been faked, although both maintained they really had seen fairies. Elsie had copied illustrations of fairies from a popular children’s book. They said they then cut out the cardboard figures and supported them with hat pins, disposing of their props once the photographs had been taken. In 1985, Elsie said that she and Frances were too embarrassed to admit the truth after fooling a prominent intellectual like Doyle.

“I never even thought of it as being a fraud — it was just Elsie and I having a bit of fun and I can’t understand to this day why they were taken in — they wanted to be taken in,” Frances said.

Doyle’s desire to find support for his belief in the new technology of photography, led him to ignore rational assumptions even while he was writing about the deductive reasoning and use of forensic evidence by his character Sherlock Holmes.

Today, the role and application of technology in most any inquiry, particularly criminal investigation, is accepted as confirming, and often, conclusive evidence. Science does indeed take the edge off personal opinion. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle ignored the lessons of his creation, Sherlock Holmes, and ignored forensic evidence and suffered public humiliation for his oversight. 🌧️

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